

A Questionable Infatuation: Toward a Solution of the TNF Issue

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The 1979 NATO decision to modernize its theater nuclear forces remains a divisive issue not only within European politics but between the United States and its NATO allies as well. In this article Glenn Kessler argues that while the original military rationale for the 1979 communiqué may be questionable, the political capital invested in the decision must not now be wasted. Accordingly, both the arms control and deployment components of the 1979 decision must be preserved in order to ensure the credibility of future NATO communiqués. Kessler suggests a multiphase negotiation strategy to address these imperatives.

The issue of theater nuclear forces (TNF) in Europe, specifically NATO's December 1979 decision to deploy 464 ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) and 108 Pershing IIs in five European countries, has received many labels. In the West, the TNF issue is characterized as a "dilemma," a "problem," a "crisis" and a "Gordian knot," whereas in the Soviet Union, it is seen as a "threat." Furthermore, the NATO decision on TNF (or, as former Chancellor Schmidt prefers, INF) has been both decried and hailed as either a political solution to a military problem or a military remedy to a political conflict. It has even been criticized as a military decision without military purpose or utility, and as a political compromise with disastrous political ramifications. In the same breath, the 1979 agreement has been called NATO's greatest display of unity or latest threat to unity. The TNF debate has produced reams of copy in newspapers, magazines and political science journals. However, despite the deftness with which each author has tried to approach this subject, and regardless of whatever new angle on the situation is taken, clarification has seemed impossible. More than most political debates, the discussion over TNF is beset by theoretical haziness.

Indeed, one might question the need for yet another rumination on theater nuclear forces. Reading a series of TNF articles is a strenuous chore due to the lack of congruence among them, and few are as rewarding as Gregory Treverton's sober Adelphi paper, *Nuclear Weapons in Europe*.¹

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1. Gregory Treverton, *Nuclear Weapons in Europe*, Adelphi Papers no. 168 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

Political scientists, journalists and pundits appear to agree on only one thing: TNF is serious.

One of the more refreshing treatments of the TNF debate appeared in the Spring 1982 *Orbis*. "NATO and the TNF Controversy" by Morton Halperin is stimulating precisely because it points out that the TNF question might *not* be serious — that it is "only the latest in a long list" of crises accompanied by the requisite "dire warnings that the survival of the NATO alliance depends on the appropriate resolution of the crisis."² Halperin states the oft forgotten fact that NATO is probably the world's most successful alliance and that it has survived such "self-inflicted" wounds in the past. Halperin demonstrates that NATO achieves most of its major objectives in an admirably coherent fashion. He further notes that "the greatest threat to NATO is the failure of alliance leaders and scholars to understand, or rather to remember, what the basic objectives of the alliance are and how they have been met."³ Halperin says that NATO deters Soviet actions because the present nuclear system rests on uncertainty; consequently, more sophisticated weapons will not greatly enhance or reduce this "threat that leaves something to chance."⁴

This basic yet essential point often is ignored by writers who create elaborate targeting paradigms and war scenarios which illuminate the crisis of nerve that they believe afflicts NATO. The frantic search for flexible targeting options stems from two sources: the absurd theoretical distinction that has been created between theater and strategic nuclear weapons, and the desire to strengthen the "link" between European theater and strategic exchange (which follows from the initial assumption). The beauty of Halperin's argument is that he ignores this myth. He asserts that, because nuclear weapons are uncontrollable once they are used, trying to improve a theoretical ladder of escalation is simply impossible. A congressional committee report underscores the lack of realism in the present debate when it notes:

Few observers believe that the Soviet Union would actually use its SS-20s in a first strike role, but they argue that the possession of the capability and the perception of superiority it affords would permit the Soviet Union to extract political concessions from Europe in a crisis.⁵

2. Morton H. Halperin, "NATO and the TNF Controversy: Threats to the Alliance," *Orbis* 26 (Spring 1982): 105.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 111. Halperin attributes this quote to Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

5. Congressional Research Service, "The Modernization of NATO's Long-range Theater Nuclear Forces: A Report to the U.S. Congress House Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), p. 33.

Perceptions, of course, are an essential part of politics, but an unfailing reliance on a "grab bag" of imponderables does not permit reasonable policy making. This article will adhere to the minimalist approach to the TNF question suggested by Halperin, but will carry it one step further. Halperin's piece was marred by its conclusion which featured a rather cursory attempt at providing policy suggestions. Instead, this study will examine only the political and policy choices available to the United States at this time. But, before doing so, a brief overview of the TNF situation, including the Soviet position, will be presented.

The Roots of this Controversy

The rationale for the TNF modernization originally was asserted by Helmut Schmidt during a speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in 1977. He argued that the growing disparities between NATO and the Warsaw Pact in theater nuclear forces were magnified by the SALT negotiations which endeavored to neutralize the strategic capabilities of the United States and the Soviet Union, thereby weakening the credibility of the American commitment to Europe's defense.⁶ The European leaders favored TNF deployment as a means of reaffirming the American link to European defense.

An exhaustive discussion of the debate leading to the 1979 agreement is not warranted. One should, however, note that much of the debate focused on introducing factors that heightened the visibility of the new weapons. "Credible response" was required; therefore, weapons that could strike Soviet territory (Pershing IIs) were necessary. "Deterrence credibility" was demanded, so land-based systems were preferred despite the superiority of the sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) which are also politically less obtrusive.⁷ West Germany insisted on a unanimous NATO decision, with cruise missiles based in at least one other continental country. Also, the Germans insisted that Washington control the "key" to the Pershing IIs based in Germany, so as to avoid responsibility for a possible launch decision.⁸ More importantly, the NATO communique announcing the

6. Helmut Schmidt, "The 1977 Alastair Buchan Memorial Lecture," *Survival* 20 (Jan./Feb. 1978): 3-5.

7. Note that "it represents the first occasion when the Alliance — as opposed to individual nuclear weapons states — took a decision on the production (not merely the introduction) of nuclear weapons." Bertram later adds that "to ask European non-nuclear countries to endorse a nuclear weapons program inevitably forces them to protect that decision within their domestic political context by devices that are not conducive to the effectiveness of the program." Christoph Bertram, "The Implications of Theater Nuclear Weapons in Europe," *Foreign Affairs* 60 (Winter 1981): 306, 311.

8. In Germany, 108 Pershing II and 24 GLCM launchers (96 missiles); in the United Kingdom, 40 GLCM launchers (160 missiles); in Italy, 28 GLCM launchers (112 missiles); in the Netherlands and Belgium, 12 GLCM launchers (48 missiles) each. See Stanley R. Sloan, "NATO Theater Nuclear Forces," *Congressional Research Service: Issue Brief IB81128*, 17 March 1982.

decision stressed the "dual-track" nature of the modernization: TNF arms control, in conjunction with SALT III, would be pursued in a complementary fashion with deployment. Although it may seem unusual, and perhaps counterproductive, to issue both arms control and arms build-up statements, this decision was necessary to preserve a unanimous vote. Even so, the final communiqué was accepted with reservations by Belgium and the Netherlands.⁹

Soviet reaction to the TNF deployment proposal, of course, has been unreservedly hostile; indeed, the Soviets have tried their best to stop any phase of the TNF program. In the months before the decision, Brezhnev indicated that compromise might be possible. However, when the West, to its possible regret, ignored those proposals and went ahead with the "dual-track" plan, the Soviet Union refused to discuss TNF negotiations for approximately six months. Preliminary negotiations were begun in October 1980, but the presidential election postponed the negotiations until November 1981, when talks opened in Geneva without the benefit of concurrent SALT talks. Despite Reagan's surprise "zero-option" proposal of November 18, 1981, these negotiations have made little apparent progress.

More specifically, the Soviet Union has countered the 1979 decision with a very effective propaganda campaign in Europe. Partly because the military purpose of the weapons never seemed clear,¹⁰ the Soviet Union could exploit the initial doubts in the Alliance enough so that weapons originally designed to "link" theater and strategic exchanges were criticized because "they provide the possibility of fighting a limited nuclear war confined only to Europe."¹¹ Furthermore, the Soviet military makes a compelling case for keeping the SS-20s; the SS-4s and SS-5s are twenty years old, of relatively poor quality, and are clustered in vulnerable or "soft" sites.¹² Although the SS-20s are more advanced and mobile missiles,

9. "The dual-track NATO decision of December 1979 was not taken seriously by either side to the argument. The anti-LRTNF modernization people were convinced that domestic politics would abort the program; while the LRTNF proponents always thought they knew that the negotiation track would prove to be a dead letter." Colin Gray, *TNF Negotiations: Some Principles for Guidance*, Symposium on TNF and Arms Control, Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, Department of State, July 1981.

10. "The United States does not seem to have designed the Pershing II missiles or scaled the overall program with the aim of hitting the Soviet Union in mind, and the same military advantage could probably be gained in other ways ... In short, it is hard to think of any sound military reason for pursuing the new deployments that would justify the high cost of the two programs." Kevin Lewis, *Scientific American*, December 1980, p. 69-71.

11. Lawrence Freedman, "NATO Myths," *Foreign Policy*, no. 45 (Winter 1981-82), p. 52. Helmut Sonnenfeldt has spoken of the "real incompatible 'secret dreams' of Americans and Europeans, i.e., that the former want to assure that Europe will be the exclusive battlefield in an East-West war, while the latter want to make sure that the war takes place over their heads between the superpowers." Helmut Sonnenfeldt, *Soviet Objectives and Negotiating Strategy*, Symposium on TNF and Arms Control, Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, Department of State, July 1981.

12. Gregory Treverton simply states: "The SS-4s and SS-5s are obsolete. They take a day or more

the Soviets stress that they really do not have a greater destructive capability than the SS-4s and SS-5s. Brezhnev's *Der Spiegel* interview¹³ and the publication of *The Threat to Europe*, a brief book intended for European consumption, sought to discredit Western claims about the Soviet build-up and military doctrine.¹⁴ Both were crucial to the attractive presentation of the Soviet position to antinuclear demonstrators.

Soviet propaganda was also effective because of the peculiar political visibility of the 1979 decision. Germany already had the largest concentration of conventional and nuclear weapons of any NATO country other than the United States, but the deployment of GLCMs in such small countries as Belgium and the Netherlands was unprecedented. Since the political significance of weapons was usually stressed over their military value, the United States seemed to regard the introduction of such destructive weapons as merely a political matter.¹⁵ Soviet statements seemed sympathetic to the Europeans' apprehensions and fears. In contrast, the Reagan Administration appeared particularly clumsy in its propaganda efforts. It created more doubts and fears with the development of the neutron bomb (ERW), the eager discussion of "winnable," "limited" nuclear war, and the constant use of the term "European theater." This situation was exacerbated by Congress's failure to ratify SALT II.

In addition, Reagan's counting methods seemed even more suspect than the Soviet figures. He insisted that the Soviet Union had attained a six-to-one superiority in TNF (over 3,800 Soviet delivery vehicles versus nearly six hundred American weapons). This ratio was reached by including 2,700 MiG and Su fighters, which the Soviet Union does not count because they are not intermediate range bombers, and by ignoring the significant French and British nuclear forces. The Soviet Union says that NATO (including the French and the British) and the Warsaw Pact have reached parity at roughly one thousand delivery vehicles each. Reagan's "zero-option" proposal reveals the dubiousness of his counting method because he is concerned only with the three hundred SS-20s and not the other weapons.¹⁶

A conclusive decision on the eventual deployment of the GLCMs and Pershings, as envisioned in 1979, has been impossible, partly because of

to prepare for firing. Simple logic, military necessity, and bureaucratic momentum could all have suggested that they be modernized." Treverton, p. 10.

13. The interview was given in advance of Brezhnev's trip to Bonn that month.

14. *The Threat to Europe* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981). See Raymond L. Garthoff's review in *Arms Control Today* 12 (March 1982): 9-10.

15. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Most Critical Testing Still Lies Ahead for Missiles in Theater Nuclear Modernization*, Report to Congress, 2 March 1981, p. 25. This report quite clearly reveals State Department thinking on the subject.

16. Weapons figures are from John Vinocur, "Opening Gambit," *New York Times*, 22 November 1981, sec. 4, p. 1.

the Reagan Administration's reluctance to negotiate, but mostly because of the vagaries of European politics. Ironically, though dissension over TNF within Schmidt's Social Democratic Party contributed to his fall from power, the alliance between the conservative Christian Democrats and the moderate Free Democrats should be more amenable to the deployment. Yet, the rising popularity of the Green Alternative List Party is directly attributable to the TNF controversy. The conservative victory in the Netherlands also might finally force a long-delayed Parliamentary vote there.

The Search for a Solution

The ambiguous nature of the NATO communiqué — with its volatile mix of both arms control and arms build up — lacked a cogent public military rationale and reeked of political expediency. This permitted a situation which purely political acts could only exasperate. As Christoph Bertram points out, "what may be desirable today, for political reasons, may become for other political reasons less desirable tomorrow."¹⁷ The ultimate irony, as repeatedly stressed above, is that the political arena makes the TNF question much more serious than the military factors would seem to indicate — but the solution to this political dilemma lies in the tiring and mundane process of counting bombs.

Negotiating strategy, therefore, should focus on political damage limitation, which includes constructing a reasonable military rationale for TNF. The original decision in 1979 was significant because it appeared to indicate that NATO had tried to coordinate finally its military policy planning. Based on this, Reagan's zero-option initiative can be seen as counterproductive for two reasons. First, it suggests that the 1979 deployment agreement was foolishly contrived. Second, it loses even the slightest pretense of seeming an innocent opening bid since it requires that the Soviets dismantle existing systems while the U.S. cancels only prospective programs. Reagan's zero-option proposal at best resembles a carefully presented propaganda ploy designed to delay arms control talks beyond the 1983 starting date for TNF deployment. Zero-option, quite frankly, is not consistent with the original TNF policy. Consequently, its long-term political worth will probably be limited.

A successful TNF arms control approach, after all, must be tied explicitly to the original NATO communiqué. The political capital invested in that deployment calendar, no matter how flawed, cannot be squandered. The so-called "status quo ante" strategy — the proposal to return to the military situation before December 1979 — ignores this point in the same manner

17. Bertram, p. 309.

as does the zero-option. Under this proposal, for instance, the TNF modernization plan would be cancelled if the Soviet Union cut back to one hundred SS-20s (or an even higher number if all the SS-4s and SS-5s were removed). In effect, the "status quo ante" scheme would recreate the balance of forces that existed in October 1979, when the NATO alliance contemptuously ignored Brezhnev's proposal to halt SS-20 deployment. Again, this is an untenable approach as it ultimately would undermine the legitimacy of the NATO decision-making process.

One might argue that such a concern with the "political image" of NATO is unwarranted, particularly if the public reaction to this negotiating stance is favorable. One could also point out the favorable military aspects of this plan; the forward-based systems (FBS), which the U.S. has successfully excluded from all arms control agreements, would remain untouched. It is difficult to gauge an amorphous quality such as the "political consciousness" of an alliance; nonetheless, the political ramifications of public perceptions are certainly more relevant than the sort of theoretical perceptions created by weapons buffs in their endless nuclear exchange scenarios. Thus, an arms control agreement that would operate within the communiqué framework would be infinitely preferable, as it would not strain the credibility of future alliance declarations.

Starting with a SALT Base

The 1979 communiqué emphasized an explicit link to the SALT III process, but unfortunately, this link has, for the most part, been disregarded. Certainly, the Reagan Administration's half-hearted stabs at arms control have not contributed to coherent policy making. The lack of coordination has been exacerbated because the strategic arms talks (START) were initiated only this past summer, long after the TNF discussions began. This division has only accentuated the poorly contrived distinction between theater and strategic systems, a distinction that the Soviet Union rejects. They insist, and not without some justification, that a nuclear weapon that hits Soviet territory does not have a different character if it arrives from Germany or from the United States. Furthermore, it is equally silly to feign fear over SS-20s when Soviet strategic weapons can readily be targeted on Europe.¹⁸

But, at the same time, a comprehensive approach to arms control must be avoided. The lengthy SALT II negotiations demonstrated two basic flaws of comprehensive treaties: one, they are confusing and forbidding to the average citizen; two, they can be overtaken and occasionally sunk

18. McGeorge Bundy, "America in the 1980s: Reframing Our Relations with Our Friends and Among Our Allies," *Survival* 24 (Jan./Feb. 1982): 24-28.

by certain political events, no matter how irrelevant to the general treaty process. As Lawrence Freedman notes:

There is a real danger that, whatever the motives in reassuring domestic opinion or preserving a modicum of detente, the result will be more prolonged and acrimonious negotiations followed by disappointment and recriminations. This, in turn, could lead to the discrediting of even limited forms of East-West discussions on military issues.¹⁹

Any new comprehensive treaty would involve a variety of weapons, some of which are irrelevant to the problem of the 1979 decision, such as "battlefield" nuclear weapons. In addition, the counting rules that made both the protocol and treaty of SALT II so complicated would be required in any subsequent comprehensive treaty (the Reagan Administration's interest in throw-weight ceilings in the second stage of the START negotiations will make that treaty particularly complex). Freedman has suggested a somewhat simplified comprehensive treaty, in which 400 launchers would be added to the eventual ceiling for central systems under SALT II (2,250). The Soviet SS-20s would be included in the subceiling of 1,320 MIRVed missiles (Freedman suggests a credit of 120 for medium-range missiles), since the SS-20s' three warheads would not be counted under the launcher tally.²⁰ Most American FBS forces would be counted under this proposal, as would Soviet aircraft such as the Backfire bomber. But even this relatively simple plan would involve complex negotiations, and it shies away from the drastic cuts that Reagan consistently has said he would seek during his term.

Sidney Drell, on the other hand, has proposed a radical plan that focuses on launcher and reentry vehicle (L + RV) counting rules: specifically, a L + RV quota of eight thousand for strategic systems, with an additional one thousand intermediate-range systems (a range over one thousand miles). This approach would allow both superpowers to "mix and match" weapons, and would include both the Soviet Backfire bomber and the American FBS. In addition, the proposed nine thousand total L + RV ceiling would cut both arsenals by about 50 percent. The strength of this proposal lies in its simplicity. But given the mind-set of the current Administration, the cuts are too dramatic (on both sides) and the concept too original.²¹

19. Lawrence Freedman, "The Dilemma of Theatre Nuclear Arms Control," *Survival* 23 (Jan./Feb. 1981): 2.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-10.

21. Sidney Drell, "L + RV: A Formula for Arms Control," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 38 (April 1982): 28-34; and interview with Drell, 27 March 1982.

Still, the solution to the TNF problem must be tied to the strategic negotiations. Rather than a comprehensive approach, a more direct, multiphase negotiating strategy is necessary. This sort of proposal has been criticized as "piecemeal," but it has the advantage of promising a series of highly visible successes that nicely tie together the two arms control areas. William Hyland has advocated one of the more viable multiphase propositions. In his article, "Soviet Theatre Forces and Arms Control Policy," he argues that "protracted talks" will "sap the will" of the Alliance. The Soviets, he contends, should be given a quick, "take it or leave it" offer. In particular, the Soviet Union should be persuaded to limit themselves to sixty-five to one hundred SS-20 launchers in exchange for the West's putting a ceiling of two hundred on the Pershing I and IIs to be stationed in West Germany. Cruise missiles would be negotiated as part of START since air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) were already limited in SALT II.²² The advantages of this approach are: one, both the arms control and deployment components of the 1979 communiqué would be preserved; two, a "quick" arms control agreement would have positive political ramifications;²³ and three, the success of the first phase might inspire progress in the START negotiations. Perhaps the only real disadvantage to the proposal is that the Soviet Union might exploit the time lag between the agreements in order to "close the gap" in cruise missile technology. Apparently this is already a Soviet objective.²⁴ Lynn Davis has suggested that any "agreement should prohibit the flight testing or deployment of new types of land-based long-range missiles, after the SS-4/5, SS-20, GLCM, and Pershing II."²⁵ Certainly, this negotiating tack would mesh with the proposals currently being advanced by the Reagan Administration, though the work of the TNF team probably would end with the initial agreement on the SS-20s.

A Questionable Infatuation

The simple, two-pronged approach outlined above might alarm some of the more hard-core weapons "specialists/fanatics." It certainly does not deal with such problems as the SS-20s deployed against China (which can be moved against Europe in a crisis), the British and French nuclear forces (and Soviet interest in negotiating over them), or even the dilemma of bilateral negotiations that deal with multilateral concerns. For that matter,

22. William G. Hyland, "Soviet Theatre Forces and Arms Control Policy," *Survival* 23 (Sept./Oct. 1981): 194-99.

23. One can assume a great deal of leeway in the negotiations.

24. Leslie H. Gelb, "The Cruise Missile," *New York Times*, 2 September 1982, p. A3.

25. Lynn E. Davis, "A Proposal for TNF Arms Control," *Survival* 23 (Nov./Dec. 1981): 245.

the general analysis above studiously ignores the questions of tactical nuclear warfare in Europe, Soviet military doctrine, Warsaw Pact conventional superiority, SS-20 "hard-target kill capability" (and the perception that it might really be two-thirds of a strategic weapon) and other germane topics. One can justly accuse the author of purposeful neglect. But these topics offer only the sort of theoretical baggage that can obscure the central issue. NATO found itself in the "TNF Box" after December 1979 because of the tendency to delve into peripheral problems such as the urge to combat the falsely perceived threat from the SS-20. This resulted in a response that lacked military credibility. Instead of working within the original (though flawed) communiqué framework, policy-makers simply increased the morass of "nuclear possibilities" that can stem from the European balance of forces. Experts in both government and academia have succumbed to this questionable infatuation which, though occasionally useful, can prevent thoughtful policymaking. The TNF issue, at this point, has become a strictly political matter and can be solved through efficient negotiations which aim for an acceptable military compromise. The Hyland proposal deserves serious consideration, because it is based on this realism, and avoids the conceptual haziness that has plagued much of the discussion on the TNF issue.